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ABSTRACT

One of a series of pre-apprenticeship training modules, this self-paced student training module deals with the nature of interpersonal conflicts and ways of solving them. Included in the module are the following: cover sheet listing module goals, title, and performance indicators; introduction; study guide/check list with directions for module completion; information sheet discussing the causes and consequences of interpersonal conflict as well as practical suggestions for resolving such conflicts; self-assessment; self-assessment answers; assignment; and post assessment. Emphasis of the module is on interpersonal conflicts occurring at work. (Other related pre-apprenticeship phase 1 training modules are available separately--see note.) (MN)

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ED217261

INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING SYSTEMS

PRE-APPRENTICESHIP PHASE 1 TRAINING.

DEALING WITH INTERPERSONAL CONFLICTS

CE032 897

Goal:

The student will learn about some of the causes and consequences of interpersonal conflicts at work and some suggested techniques for dealing with them.

Performance Indicators:

The student will demonstrate in the tests, assignments and discussions, understanding of the nature of interpersonal conflicts and ways of solving them.

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Study Guide

Check each task off as you finish it.

1. ____ Read and discuss the Information section of this module.

2. ____ Complete the Self Assessment questions and compare your answers with those given on the answer sheet, following the Self Assessment.

3. ____ Complete the four assignments in your group.

4. ____ Complete the Post Assessment and continue to the next module.

Information

It is generally agreed that over 80 percent of workers who are fired lose their jobs because of their difficulties with other people, rather than for incompetence or poor work. You might feel that any evaluation of you as a worker should be based entirely on work skills, not on how you get along with other employees; well, it isn't, and, rightly or wrongly, that is the way of the working world. It is, therefore, very important to discover as much as possible the sources and causes of conflict, as well as ways of dealing with it.

There is no difficulty in recognizing open arguments and threats of violence or signs of interpersonal conflict, but, hopefully, these situations will be very rare. Most conflict is expressed indirectly and requires some experience and skill to know what is going on. Conflict could be revealed in competition for power--who is in favor with the boss, who has the most influence, who can order others around. Even less direct is the fairly frequent situation of talking behind people's backs, gossiping, slandering, badmouthing fellow workers and/or the employer. In this indirect expression of conflict, there is frequently an attempt to divide people, to create sides and to win the fight by undermining the other side. Characteristic, too, is the spreading of rumors and generalizations about groups of people. In a workplace there is a lot of conflict, there is little team feeling or group support and a minimum of genuine communication. There is, however, an abundance of dissatisfaction, frustration, confusion, irritation, resentment and anger.

It is possible to find yourself in working conditions that seem to be the cause of conflict between people. It is not always clear who or what is the initial cause of the conflict; is it the working environment, the employer's values and attitudes, supervisors, fellow-workers, or could it be the way you are interpreting and responding to things? You could spend a lot of time identifying and deciding who or what is to blame, but still be no nearer to solving the conflict, unless you also decide who is responsible for doing anything about it. When people have negative

feelings in this vague, generalized way, it is usually in a 'Them and Us" atmosphere where the employees distance themselves from the employer. This can turn into interpersonal convlict between the workers. Some people who get angry about conditions at work, say nothing until they get home; they they shout at their kids. Other people resent their boss and get angry with their co-workers over minor irritations.

In some ways it is true to say you get the working conditions and the bosses you deserve. That is a strange statement, but it arises out of what has already been discussed in previous modules: if you and your fellow workers are not cooperating, then your own division and conflict will either echo or make worse what is happening throughout the work environment. Of course, one person is not going to achieve much without the danger of being labeled a trouble-maker, but the responsibility still lies with those who want change, rather than with those who prefer to leave things exactly as they are. The more you and your fellow workers are open about your negative feelings, are active, in constructive ways, about expressing them and in suggesting alternatives, the more likely it is that your satisfaction with your work and the workplace will increase loyalty to each other and to the organization or business you are working for thrives on honest communications and sincere attempts to resolve, to the satisfaction of all parties, interpersonal conflict.

In discussing more specific interpersonal conflict between two or more individuals, it is frequently the concern of the participants to prove who is to blame and who is innocent. This is a simple approach based on a model of crime and punishment. Following this model explains why 85 percent of the people who lose their jobs do so because of difficulties in working with others. It is a quick way. However it not only wastes all the training the fired person has received but it disrupts the whole working environment. If, instead, the conflicts could be resolved, the effect on interpersonal relations at work is likely to be positive and dynamic.

In some work situations, there might be an unskilled supervisor who is over-bossy and interfering or, the opposite, lax and unclear about what is required. There could also at times, be sneaking, incompetent, inefficient fellow workers. However, it is easy to blame the other person when it might be for lack of anyone giving tactful, honest feedback that he or she continues with his or her present behavior. An underlying belief in all these modules is that if you demonstrate respect for both yourself and other people and, relate as equal human beings, you are much more

likely to get what you think is right. In the case of the over-bossy person, whether supervisor or worker, his or her relationship with others is based on a demonstration of lack of respect and inequality. If you are able to communicate your observations and feelings and suggest an alternative way, you are likely to discourage the previous behavior which is trying to continue the unequal relationship. The main point being made here is that it is not of much value to find out who is initially responsible for the conflict; the most important and useful approach is to decide who is going to try to change the relationship. Generally a guideline would be this: if you are suffering, you are responsible for trying to get rid of that discomfort.

There are many situations of conflict that you might at first think are someone else's problems and, therefore, something they should solve. For example, it is possible that another person may react in a hostile way to you becuase he or she is feeling threatened by you. Maybe it is his or her own insecurity, jealousy or whatever, in response to your good looks, talents, outgoing personality, etc. If you can sense that someone is feeling threatened by you in a situation where you have to work closely, it's your responsibility (as the stronger of the two people) to initiate some sort of solution.

There are times where the situation is reversed and the other person seems to be threatening you. (Threatening means an attack, directly or indirectly, on your personal beliefs and values.) This could by by labeling you as old, young, male, female, black, white, without accepting you as a real person in your own right. How to deal with this sort of conflict will be discussed later, but it is important to stress again that it will achieve very little to point out who is to blame; the aim is to do something about it, and that might mean that you, the person being discriminated against, are responsible for initiating that action.

Conflicts occur when individuals have different expectations; the apprentice who expects to be shown how to do something before he or she tries, and the journeyman who expects the apprentice to give it a shot first, for example. Unless these different expectations are communicated clearly, conflict will occur. This type of conflict is easier to deal with, as are differences in perception--the way two people have seen and experienced the same situation. One person might see the floor areas as clean enough until the end of the day, and another person might see it as cluttered and potentially dangerous. Just acknowledging, even to yourself, that there are many different individuals and many different values, beliefs, expectations and

ways of interpreting them, might help to put conflicts of this type into a more realistic perspective. Again, the responsibility lies with you to clarify your own position and to understand the other person's viewpoint. Expecting everyone to take on responsibility for solving conflicts is idealistic; being prepared to take on the responsibility yourself, is realistic.

Finally, there are very personal causes of conflict which involve you over-reacting, almost it seems, without being able to stop yourself, to something that is spoken or done by another person. What he or she does or says immediately seems to you a great threat to who you are, even when the other person is unaware of the power of his or her words or actions. We carry around with us a lot of interpretations of early memories that signal when to fight for our lives, or so it seems. For example, just the tone of someone's voice (a fellow student or apprentice) might remind you of being criticized and put down as a child by a dominating adult. This could "hook" your emotional response so that you behave in a very angry or defensive manner. In situations such as these when the adrenalin suddenly rushes through your body in response to someone else's remark or attitude, you know one of your emotional "buttons" has been pushed. We owe it to ourselves as well as to the people we are likely to terrify by our over-reaction to find out what causes this immediate upset, so that we can be on guard and ready to 'cool' it.

We are now at a point where we have discussed causes of interpersonal conflicts in a work setting and stressed the importance of being active, of taking responsibility for trying to solve them. What happens if you remain inactive and just hope it will sort itself out? First, the bad atmosphere, the poor personal communication, etc., will continue and worsen. Secondly, as a result of not expressing your negative emotions, you may start to suffer physically--feeling tense, having headaches, poor sleep, being irritable and jumpy, etc. So, why do some people either avoid doing anything about the conflict hoping it will go away or postpone taking action until things get so bad, that they almost explode? The most common justifications given are the fear of not being liked and the fear of harming the other person.

Both of these fears seem reasonable and kind-hearted; they are, however, rarely sufficient to compensate for the upset that you're going through while interpersonal conflict continues. They are also based on shaky evidence; there is little, if any, proof that a person who communicates deep concern about interpersonal conflict and makes a genuine effort to patch things up, ends up being disliked. On the contrary, they are more likely to win friends. The second fear if also an unnecessary one

and probably arises out of memories of being hurt in childhood. There is little proof to suggest that people benefit from being sheltered from the truth; there is no evidence to show that interpersonal conflicts are resolved by pretending they do not exist, and there is little reason to believe that adults cannot easily survive negative feedback from another person.

How, then, do you deal effectively with interpersonal conflict?

Choose the best time.

Nothing is solved, to the satisfaction of both parties, if you are in a raging temper. When you are feeling boiling mad, that is not the time to try to resolve conflict. It is all right to communicate that you are feeling angry and that you need some time before you wait to deal with the matter. Give yourself time to cool down; even the old way of counting silently up to about to 50 before you deal with the issue is far better than acting impulsively while in anger. When you can control your voice, your facial expressions and gestures, it time to ask the other person to try to resolve the conflict with you. Here is an example that might test many people to their limit: you are having a well-earned break, pouring some coffee from a thermos, relaxing, taking a long, satisfying drink only to discover that your "friend" has put salt in it; he or she is laughing, almost in a state of hysteria. The first impulse might be to throw the coffee and thermos at the culprit, but, taking time gives you not only the satisfaction of appearing to be in control (and therefore, a much stronger person), but also the reality of being able to deal with the situation with more impact. You then go through the same procedure as you did in Communication Skills:

> "Jim, I know you get a lot of fun out of playing jokes but when my breaktime and drink are interfered with, I feel very angry. Would you please never touch my belongings again without asking me first? Thank you."

Remember, if you are going to show respect for him as an individual, just as you expect him to do to you, this type of approach is the only way; punching him out, even if you are a lot stronger, does not solve the conflict, it is more likely to increase its seriousness.

Show you are taking responsibility

Taking responsibility for who you are, how you feel, where you are at the moment, and what you want to achieve, is a recurrent theme throughout these modules; it is

the way in which you make these attempts that determines whether you will be successful or not. It is best summed up in the advice: take care to say "I" rather than "you." Instead of "you make me mad" say, "I feel angry." Instead of "you are a shirker" say, "I feel resentful when I have to do work that is not mine." The responsibility is yours, the feelings are yours, and the language must reflect this. When you make these personal statements, there is no mention of blame, the emphasis is on solving the problem. As suggested earlier, there is no benefit gained in accusing people of being in the wrong.

The language formula

If you wish to resolve conflict between you and another person, the language formula is:

a. tell the other person, politely, what it is that he or she is doing that upsets you,
b. tell him or her your feelings by saying, "I feel.....,"
c. tell him or her how his or her behavior affects you,
d. make a suggestion, using tact and showing respect, for an alternative way of behaving.

Here, again, is the formula in an illustration:

a. when you stand around talking with the customers,
b. I feel irritated
c. because I am left to complete the painting by myself,
d. I wonder if you would, please, try to confine the talk with customers to our lunch break?

Negotiating

Some conflicts will involve the advanced skill of negotiating in order to resolve them. You can use these skills to resolve your own interpersonal conflicts or to help other people. The skills involve the principle of 'give and take' and of making it clear to the other person that you are prepared to give a little for the sake of getting along together. It is close to bargaining at a garage sale: the price is marked $5 and you ask, "will you take four" and the reply is "no, but I'll let it go for $4.50." That is bargaining, negotiating, the skill of compromise to get what you want. Finding a solution to interpersonal conflicts could, in theory, be as simple, as long as "give and take" is acceptable to the people in disagreement. Here is an example:

Since starting your job as an apprentice electrician, you are the only one who is asked to do pole climbing. You use your skill of tact and ability to communicate your feelings and suggest the alternative that you do it half the week and your fellow apprentice does it the other half. It is readily agreed upon (you were only asked to do it because you seemed to enjoy it), and all your tension and resentment disappear. They were totally unnecessary. It is incredible the extra load of worry and tension that we often carry around with us because we have been afraid to take responsibility, speak up and try to resolve interpersonal concern.

Discrimination

You could become a great help to other people who are having interpersonal conflict, offering your skills as a negotiator. This is a great challenge and is not so difficult as long as both people recognize that you are not wanting to take sides. In doing this, it is important to get away from the personalities involved and to identify the issues. This is particularly useful when you are dealing with emotionally-charged beliefs that create prejudice and discrimination. Following is an illustration of a third person trying to act as a neutral negotiator identifying and dealing with the issues rather than staying close to the people's feeling:

a. "I don't get upset over little mistakes! It's just that I don't want to have them landing on me all the time. Why do I always get stuck with people straight out of school?"
b. "What's that to do with it, you're such a miserable....."
c. "Hold on a minute because it seems like there are two issues here. The first is "how much do you cover for other people's mistakes?" and the second is "can you stereotype a whole age group of people, or are individuals different?"

Prejudice and discrimination are likely to be accompanied, always, by interpersonal conflict, because they devalue the individual. Take as an example the existence of sexual harassment; this exists in any situation where a person in a higher authority tries to get sexual favors through the weight of his or her position. In situations like these, as with prejudice arising from race, age, national origin, etc., it is probably better to get help from someone else. As a first attempt to resolve conflict, keep a written record of any incidents and remarks that seem discrimatory or harassing. Then, with a sympathetic co-worker, approach the person involved. Use the same formula as has already been outlined: a) say what is bothering you, b) say how you feel about it, c) say what effect it is having on you, d) suggest

how you would like things to change. Your attempt to resolve the conflict has a high chance of success even when dealing with entrenched attitudes; remember, it is not the attitudes of another person you can change, only the behavior towards you. If this fails, you have recourse to complain at a higher level. Your first aim, however, should be to decrease conflict and help yourself and your fellow workers get what you deserve for all the hours that you are together--a satisfying cooperative and supportive working environment.

Self Assessment

Decide which answer best completes the sentence or answers the question. Write the letter for that answer in the blank to the left of the statement.

1. ____ Of those workers who are 'fired', what percentage lose their jobs because of difficulties with other people?
   a. 20%
   b. 85%
   c. 60%

2. ____ In a workplace where there is a lot of conflict, which of the following are you unlikely to find:
   a. gossipping
   b. team support
   c. prejudice

3. ____ When you experience interpersonal conflict, which is the best thing to do:
   a. find out who to blame
   b. leave it up to the employer to sort it out
   c. take responsibility and see what you can do about it

4. ____ When you are feeling angry and upset as a result of someone else's attitudes or behavior, it is best to:
   a. communicate to the person involved how you feel
   b. get really angry with the other person
   c. keep quiet and say nothing

5. ____ If you don't like the interpersonal conflict you are experiencing, who is responsible for doing something about it?
   a. the boss
   b. your fellow workers
   c. you

6. ____ Which of these could lead to interpersonal conflict?
   a. different expectations
   b. different perceptions
   c. prejudice

7. ____ When you feel suddenly furious about something someone says or does, it is better to:
   a. let them have it right away
   b. control yourself and forget about it
   c. wait until you cool down and then deal with it

8. ____ Saying "I feel angry," rather than, "you make me angry" shows you are:
   a. blaming the other person
   b. taking responsibility for your own feelings
   c. making a fuss

9. ____ Sexual harassment is:
   a. giving compliments and asking someone for a date
   b. showing you are attracted to someone
   c. using a position of power to try to get sexual favors

10. ____ A person who reveals deeply entrenched prejudice is more likely to be able to change his or her:
   a. behavior
   b. attitudes
   c. beliefs

Self Assessment Answers

1. b
2. b
3. c
4. a
5. c
6. a, b, c
7. c
8. b
9. c
10. a

Assignment

Write down briefly and then discuss within a small group:

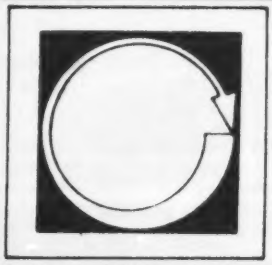
1. Things that make you very angry.

2. Examples of occasions when you expressed your anger.

3. Examples of times when you kept your anger to yourself.

4. Any successful, personal experience of dealing with interpersonal conflict.

• Post Assessment



1. Write out the suggested, a, b, c, d, formula for dealing with interpersonal conflicts.

2. Write out an example of your own, illustrating these four steps.